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## *Fragments of University Reminiscence*

William C. Atkinson

Edited and annotated by Ann L Mackenzie

### Chapter 4

#### 1952–: Around and about a Quincentenary

On another ten [years]: 1952. The University [of Glasgow], recovering from the celebrations, was settling down to its next five hundred years. 1951 had begun with the blackest day in its history, the shame of the January Rectorial [installation] in St. Andrew's Hall. My most vivid memory, a photographer a few feet away felled with a cabbage. When radio and press had broadcast the ignominy to the world, the Students' Representative Council's many foreign guests carried their personal tidings to the four quarters. And the [new] Rector, John McCormick, the paladin of Scottish Nationalism.<sup>1</sup> If this student breed typified the intellectual hope of the country's to-morrow the outlook for Scotland was dim indeed.

In Senate a debate on student excesses and Senate responsibility in the matter. Old-timers looked back: 'You should have been here in my time'. Those whose experience had lain furth of Scotland knew that indiscipline in and out of the lecture-room lasted just as long as one was prepared to allow it. The Principal [Sir Hector Hetherington] wound up. 'This isn't Edinburgh. Glasgow students haven't yet killed a Rector'.<sup>2</sup> And no action

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1 The Rectorship at Glasgow University is an elected office. The Rector is voted in by the students and serves a three-year term. John McCormick (1904–1961), a Scottish lawyer, Scottish nationalist politician and advocate of Home Rule in Scotland, was elected Rector in 1950. It was in that same year, to the fury of the University's Principal, Sir Hector Hetherington, that nationalist students from Glasgow removed the Stone of Destiny from Westminster Abbey and returned it to Scotland. McCormick had become involved in politics while a student at Glasgow University, where in 1927 he established the Glasgow University Scottish Nationalist Association (GUSNA). This organization, designed to promote Scottish nationalism and self-government, helped bring together various nationalist organizations, to form, in 1928, the National Party of Scotland (NPS). A talented speaker and organizer, McCormick served as its national secretary. McCormick was often known by his nickname 'King John', which came about during a debate in which he was participating. A question was asked whether a devolved Scotland would retain the monarchy, or would be a republic, and someone said: 'No, it will be a kingdom and John McCormick will be our king'.

2 There was traditionally student misconduct not only at the actual Rectorial installation—such as described here—but also before the poll took place, when supporters of

was taken. No one said '*La Trahison des clercs*', but it could be sensed that the pass had been sold. Students knew that the *sponsio academica* was no longer binding.<sup>3</sup>

The June celebrations proper showed the University in a different light, the Senate as custodian now of its traditions and free for once to ignore the transient student body. From universities all over the world came distinguished emissaries to pay tribute, and for a week we were a true and open *universitas*.

Our house guest was the distinguished Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset.<sup>4</sup> I had translated *History as a System*, his only work to appear first in a foreign tongue, and had declined the consequent invitation to take on, as official translator, the *opera omnia*.<sup>5</sup> One irritant of Ortega's philosophic calm was the belief that, had he not chosen in youth to study in Germany instead of England, he could, he said, have been a millionaire. Lecture tours in the States in Spanish or German offered no scope at all. Glasgow treated him well but somehow failed to captivate; and, having collected his honorary degree and a bottle of whisky—still in 1951 extremely hard to come by but seemingly a prime object of his visit—he left on the eve of our great send-off, the trip down the water.<sup>6</sup>

It was the most perfect day I had ever known in these parts. Some university, said our guests, that has even the weather at command. A mild ripple of disappointment there was for some who had not read the small

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rival candidates would indulge in a supposedly 'mock' 'Rectorial Fight'. For a photograph of the students' 'Rectorial Fight' in 1950, just before MacCormick was elected—an election which led to the Rectorial installation the following January to which Atkinson refers here with so much disapproval—see A. L. Brown & Michael Moss, *The University of Glasgow: 1451–1996* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. P., 1996), 45.

3 The students' misconduct in 1958 while celebrating another Rectorial installation, left Atkinson ever more outraged; so much so that he published an article about it, titled '*La Trahison des Clercs*', *The College Courant* (*The Journal of the Glasgow University Graduates Association*) (Whitsun, 1958), 105–09. His article begins: 'One more Rectorial has come and gone. Once again the good name of the University has been dragged in the mire'.

4 José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) was in Glasgow to receive from the University, in the year it celebrated its five hundredth anniversary, the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws. The letter from the University extending the invitation to Ortega, dated 17 March 1950, and his reply, dated Madrid, 3 May 1950, accepting the degree, addressed to Christian Fordyce, then Clerk of Senate of the University of Glasgow, are in Glasgow University's Archives. It may be assumed that Atkinson had proposed Ortega for this honour.

5 *History As a System* [original title: *Historia como sistema* (1935)], trans. William C. Atkinson, in José Ortega y Gasset, *Toward a Philosophy of History*, trans. Helene Weyl, William C. Atkinson & Eleanor Clark (New York: W. W. Norton, 1941), 165–233. Atkinson had a high opinion of Ortega's work: 'Ortega y Gasset (1882–1955) brought the most acute Spanish mind of his day, nurtured on German philosophers, to bear on the contemporary social and political scene [...] He was, too, in the narrow sense, a great writer, an artist in words as well as in ideas' (see 'Literature and the Arts—III', in Atkinson, *A History of Spain and Portugal*, 343–52 [p. 346]).

6 A reference to the cruise on the River Clyde, with which the University ended its celebrations of its quincentenary.

print: our vessel was not the *Queen Mary* but the original, now *Queen Mary II*. Otherwise a good time, a very good time, was had by all. Pope Nicholas V would have been proud.

Salamanca, some years on, had its great occasion, and claimed even greater antiquity. Charged to represent Scotland's four universities, I set out with four Latin addresses, not to be handed over ceremonially: one stood up and read. Invitees were called on in inverse order of the antiquity of their institutions, this giving pride of place to Southampton, then as a university just three months old, its representative a graduate of mine.<sup>7</sup> The honour of appearing last fell to Cairo, on the ground that, having lost all record, there could be no disputing its claim. No jollifications on this programme, no great river to sail down, but much good fellowship; and as finale an invitation from Franco to hear him address a select audience in Madrid. He sent up planes.<sup>8</sup> A heavy rainstorm accompanied us and, the aged craft in which I flew leaking, we had the novel spectacle of passengers sheltering under umbrellas.

The grand preoccupation of the sixties, the urge to create more and more universities *coûte que coûte*, was not yet in full flood, but Glasgow had already embarked on an ambitious programme of expansion. A planning committee for a new library had already taken one decision, to be overtaken and in the upshot overthrown by the quincentenary: it would be right-angled, replacing nos. 1 to 8 of the Professors' Quadrangle, the old assumption of four resident maids having wilted the appeal of this, and not merely to incumbents of the Old College's twelve chairs.<sup>9</sup>

As Convenor of the Library Committee I now embarked on a 3-month visitation of American university libraries and picked the brains of their librarians. All were interested, and co-operative. Philadelphia had just completed, and had to shelve temporarily, its plans for a new building, and back in Glasgow the Librarian was surprised one day to see them fall on his desk without a covering note.

Austin, University of Texas, the library occupied twelve floors of a towering skyscraper made, if not famous, notorious by the madman who

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7 At this distance of time, it has proved impossible to identify the graduate Atkinson refers to here.

8 It appears, from what Atkinson implies here, that Spain's Head of State, Francisco Franco (1892–1975) sent (military?) planes to transport the foreign representatives of their universities from the celebrations at Salamanca to Madrid. Salamanca University was founded in 1252. So presumably its celebrations which Atkinson describes, though he indicates that these were held several years after Glasgow University's, would, in fact, have taken place in 1952.

9 Atkinson means that at the time of the University's move in 1870 from the Old College on the High Street in Glasgow city centre to the new building on Gilmorehill designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott (1811–1878), the professors holding the University's originally established chairs numbered twelve. Fortunately, the University's plans for the location of the new library changed, and the houses in the Professors' Quadrangle at Nos 1–8 were spared from demolition.

had gained access to the roof with a gun and murdered indiscriminately in the streets below. I asked one of my stock questions: In a new building is there anything in this one you wouldn't take over? 'There's nothing in this one I would take over', was the answer. 'This building would be of far more use to the University laid on its side'.

Returned home, I found Court and architect discussing expansion over the next half-century. He had a theory: place your tallest building on your highest spot, to serve as a landmark for miles around, and envisaged a skyscraper library at the top of Hillhead Street.<sup>10</sup> Austin saved us from that.

Another early concern was a new building for Modern Languages, that had come a long way from the days of Pearce Lodge but were still scattered piecemeal around the site.<sup>11</sup> I was charged to sit down with the President of the Royal Institute of British Architects and come up with answers to two questions. Could the only site available—end of University Gardens, next to the old observatory—accommodate the Faculty's needs? And could the resulting building be had for £100,000? The year was 1958. Answer yes, and the building could go ahead. We answered yes.<sup>12</sup>

That we, nor the planning committee, nor the Faculty, did not have all the data in advance goes without saying. First the site. Unmapped mineral workings drove the foundations deeper and deeper, making the site steeper and steeper, till it looked as if all the money could go in shifting earth. That was to result in the oddity of a building four storeys high in front and two behind, with infinite ingenuity in the internal planning. Second, how many languages, and what the demand, over half a century? Could Chinese one day be in, Russian out? What of Czech, Polish, the other tongues a Royal Commission had castigated British universities for ignoring at the nation's peril during the late war? What of student numbers, up and up inexorably, or tapering off, or switching to science, engineering, the new technologies as the rest of the world learned English?

Four chairs when we began, five with Celtic when we finished, and five professors into four siderooms won't go. So Celtic never got in, nor Russian.

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10 The new library was indeed built at the top of Hillhead Street, in due course. It was a tall building, too, though not exactly a USA-style 'skyscraper'. It was built in three phases, the first of which was not opened until 1968, 'designed to balance visually the University tower', across from it in University Avenue; the Library's second phase was completed in 1982–83; and a third phase in 1986 (see Brown & Moss, *The University of Glasgow: 1451–1996*, 44).

11 The Department of Hispanic Studies in the 1950s was still located at the start of University Gardens, in one of the grey-stone Victorian buildings (see, in this *Festschrift*, the article by McIntyre, 'Professor William C. Atkinson [WCA] As Remembered by Some Former Students').

12 For more on the then 'new' Modern Languages Building (opened in 1960), and for a clearer idea of Atkinson's part in bringing it about, see William C. Atkinson, 'The Groves of Academe. Modern Languages in University Gardens', *The College Courant (Journal of the Glasgow University Graduates Association)* (Whitsun, 1960), 125–29.

One bonus we did contrive, re-casting very late in the day the largest lecture room as a modest but surprisingly well-equipped theatre, an amenity that was to enrich the life of the University as a whole.<sup>13</sup> Visitors from California could recognise in the handsome library ideas brought home from Berkeley. Whether we got it all for £100,000 the reader will forbear to ask. There were, one remembers, famous contentions with the University Grants Committee. And now, but a quarter of a century on, a new New Modern Languages Building, and others have taken over.<sup>14</sup>

Visitors from Latin America were now a commonplace to Hispanic Studies. One, a leading architect from Brazil, desired a student guide to Hampden Park. He was building a vast stadium in São Paulo and sought re-assurance that he had left nothing out. Another, Minister of Education in Colombia, pointed out gently as we laboured over the Pass of Balmaha – 1 in 7, I explained—with a slipping clutch,<sup>15</sup> that between Medellín and Bogotá he had to negotiate three ranges of the Andes. A third was ex-President of Costa Rica.

But Latin America is a world in itself.

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<sup>13</sup> Atkinson played a key part in ensuring that the Modern Languages Building was equipped with this theatre on the ground floor, and was especially proud of it. The first play to be performed in it was Anouilh's *L'Alouette*, put on by students of the French Department on the occasion of the formal opening of the building by the French Ambassador on 11 February 1960 (see Atkinson, 'The Groves of Academe', 127–28).

<sup>14</sup> A reference to the additional Modern Languages Building, called the Hetherington Building, after Sir Hector Hetherington, in Bute Gardens, which was opened in 1983. The fact that Atkinson mentions the Hetherington Building here shows that, though he almost certainly first wrote these memoirs in the early 1970s, he did go back to them in the years which followed, and made certain insertions and revisions.

<sup>15</sup> A reference to the narrow pass at the village of Balmaha, Scotland, on the eastern shore of Loch Lomond. Balmaha, a popular tourist destination, sits at the westerly foot of Conic Hill, and is roughly twenty miles along the West Highland Way, if coming from Milngavie.